



Harris & Pearson Oral History Project

Jennifer Milton Interview

When did you work at Harris & Pearson?

I started there in May 1958.

How long did you work there for?

For 10 years, until 1968 when the Sales Office closed, and that was transferred to Moor Street, and I went with it.

How long did you stay with the Company then?

I was with the company 20 years all told – getting on for the end. Mr Tonks had Parkinson's disease and went into hospital, then came back. But we were basically running the office by ourselves. Anyway, Mr Tonks couldn't cope and he retired, so they brought a fellow from EJ's in the Delph – Trevor Turner – he was only there about 2 years and then they decided that the Sales was best all run from Moor Street. So Mr Pearson, Trevor and I went there in the April, but Mr Pearson retired at the Christmas, so we ran it and wound the company up. The Moor Street offices were down towards the canal, in J T Price's offices. After that I went to Cricket Fields, where I was Production Controller.

Was Harris & Pearson's a good place to work?

It was all right – a lot better than some places. It was old-fashioned though. Very old-fashioned premises and methods as well, but, yes, it was nice, and the people were nice, which made all the difference.

What was your job there?

I went there as a Junior Shorthand Typist and Filing Clerk, and, after about 4 years the lady that did the invoices and the orders – Jessie Caddick – left, and they asked me if I would do that because the work was becoming less in the office, and they didn't want to employ anyone else, so they asked me if I would do that as well. There was also a girl called Joyce Crange who did all Mr Pearson's letters, and I did the invoices, orders, and helped with arranging the transport and finding out if orders were ready to be despatched.

Where were you in the Offices?

Upstairs – in the middle office over the weighbridge to start with, where the telephone was. My desk had got the telephone on it, and it was sideways on to the window, up against the petition, on a kitchen table, with Mr Tonks' desk next to it. There was a filing cabinet right in the corner, and another filing cabinet in the far corner.

What about the little hatch?

It was for passing the receiver through. It was on a fairly long lead, because there was another telephone for Trotter, Haines & Corbett, which was on a big table under the window, over the weighbridge, facing the road. It was a different number so you knew what to say depending upon which one rang.

... and the hinged glass pane above the hatch?

I've no idea – unless it was something to do with when they had gas mantles?

Can you recall the other people who worked with you there at that time?

Mr Ronald Pearson was the Managing Director – he was descendant of the Pearson who founded the company. There was Mr Tonks, he was Office Manager, and he used to prepare quotations. He worked next to me. He and I used to deal with enquiries from customers (with Mr Pearson), and the post, then with the orders for typing, and telephone queries. Jessie Caddick, she did the invoices, and Joyce Cranage, she was Mr Pearson's Secretary – that was all upstairs. Then the Representatives used to come in and bring their reports. There was a local representative – Ernest Smallman – then there was Leslie Wood, who lived in Nottingham, and they would go a week at a time to different parts of the country. They both visited existing customers and canvassed for new ones. In those days we also supplied a lot of the ironmongers, Timothy Whites & Taylors, and the railways and big steelworks too. They were a mix of standard products and special ones. The latter would require special drawings, often supplied by specialist furnace lining companies, but Harris & Pearson didn't have their own Drawing Office, although Mr Pearson used to do some of them himself. Larger customers usually had their own drawings though. There was a firm called Dowson & Mason, they were the forerunners of the builders of all the crematoria, and they'd got virtually standard designs, so once we'd got the standard patterns we'd work from those.

What sort of moulds did Harris & Pearson use?

Timber ones, they were made in the Mould Shop and kept in the Mould Store, which were ¾'s of the way down the yard. It was a father and son that worked in there – George Westwood his name was – very clever man he was with timber, and if you wanted anything for the Office he would make us a box or whatever we wanted.

Do you still have any contact with any of them?

Only Joyce Cranage – her birthday is 2 days later than mine, so we've always kept in touch, because we are of an age, send cards to each other at holidays, birthdays and at Christmas, always with a little note inside. Occasionally I see Mrs Latham, whose husband worked there.

How much contact did you have with people in the brickworks?

Initially, not a lot because that wasn't our domain, it was downstairs that dealt with the works, but you only came upstairs by invitation. If we couldn't get an answer, say from Charlie Salt, we would go to the Hovel – it's been pulled down now – a little building just down to the right-hand side of the Offices, across the top of the yard, that was the Loading Hovel. There were always notes in there of what had got to be loaded onto what lorry and when. I would often go in there and find out if the bricks were ready or not.

Can you describe what the office building was like inside?

There was the other side – Silver End Works or the Castings Department – which was Arthur Timmins, the Works' Manager, and a fellow called Hugh Digger, he was the Works' Foreman, and a girl called Pearl Jones, and one called Jean, who left, and was followed by Beverley Crisp. She used to live in Kinver, and we used to travel to work together on the same bus. They belonged to E J & J Pearson in those days. Downstairs around the big table there was Marie Allport, she did the wages, and Margaret Cartwright, the Office Junior, and she weighed the lorries when they came onto the weighbridge, and Audrey Colley, who lives in Moor Street, and then there was Charlie Salt – he was the Works' Manager – a very volatile man, but a very good man to work for. Then there was Alf Latham, who was the Works' Foreman, and then there was Tommy Timmins, who was the Under- or Yard Foreman. In the 50s there was another boy there – John Jones – and a fellow called Brian Knight. Upstairs, the little room on the left at the top of the stairs was a storeroom, for old drawings – really old ones – and old calculations, which Mr Pearson always kept. He also had large envelopes slit open so that they could be used as pieces of paper! The calculations were rolled up in elastic bands and stored in months' in a glass cabinet in Mr Pearson's room, but when this got full they were moved. We also put drawings and invoice books in there too. We never used it as a Waiting Room though.

Across the landing – where the toilets are now – there was nothing, this was accessed from the middle room. It was another storeroom. There was a safe in there, under the window, in which we kept the toilet soap and toilet roll, scrubbing brushes – the valuable stuff! And we did keep a moneybox in there as well, although we never kept much money in it. Then all around the room were the old copperplate written order books. When an order came in they were all given a number. We had little sticky numbers, put them on. They were all written in a book by hand, and the weight of the order was written in, as well as the category of the brick. All bricks had these, ranging from 01 to 10 and then they went up quite high, because various specials had their own number, and then there was a category for bags of fireclay. At the bottom of the page it was all added up and carried over to the next page. That was added up every month, and the total weight of the items that had been sold, that had gone over the weighbridge, and invoices had been prepared for, they were all added up, from the invoices, and we took one away from the other to see whether we'd had more orders or more despatches. Those were in these books, which lasted for 3 or 4 years. They were really big old leather bound ledgers that were in there, and old filing as well. Each January we would take all of the correspondence and filing out of the cabinets, put it in boxes and then put it in there. Then after about 5 or 6 years we would take the filing out of these boxes, wrap it in brown paper, and reuse the boxes. We never threw anything away – Mr Pearson wouldn't allow that. We even used carbon paper until you couldn't read it!

Back off the landing on the right was Mr Pearson's office. It was one big office, but there was a door nearly over by the window into the middle office, so that you could walk through without having to go onto the landing. He sat at a huge refectory table – a lovely leather topped one – and that was in the middle, and he sat with his back to the fire. If anybody went in for dictation, there was a chair with its back to the window onto the road, which we had to sit in. Under the window he'd got another table, a big table, which he used to open drawings out onto. Then there was a glass fronted cabinet between the table and the partition, and then the door – which was a couple of feet from the window. There was another cabinet behind the door, between the door off the landing and the door into the middle office, but I don't remember what was in there. Then there was a big picture of his father, and another of the Centenary, and there was a clock. A lot of that stuff is at the Ironbridge Gorge Museum, because when we were moving I mentioned it to Mr Elliot Evers' secretary, and she said that they were looking for artefacts, and they came over and looked at a few things – they took some of the ledgers – and they took the clock. Oh, and there was a clock on top of Mr Pearson's cabinet as well. And he had a wooden inkstand on his desk, about a foot square, with glass bottles in it. He always wrote in fountain pen or pencil.

The office beyond was where Joyce sat to do all the typing, letters invoices and quotations. She was Mr Pearson's Secretary but was furthest from him probably because it was quieter in there.

Do you remember seeing or using the speaking tube device?

Yes – we used it as a toy when Mr Pearson was out, but I don't recall him using it on a regular basis.

Can you recall any unusual incidents that happened during your time at Harris & Pearson?

I remember them demolishing one of the chimneys. The driveway used to go straight down from the archway towards the canal. There was a fireclay mill down there, and on the right there, were two round kilns, and there was a chimney, and I remember them demolishing that. We watched it from the upstairs window, and everybody had to be moved out of the yard. They blew it up. They also demolished the one from the main chamber kiln as well. It had 22 chambers.

I also remember an old boy that had a lorry and he used to fill this with ash from the coal-fired kilns. He didn't work for us, he worked for Sid Priest, a haulage contractor in Wordsley, but he was permanently in our yard. He was a funny old boy – a real character – and he used to shovel these ashes into the lorry and off he'd trundle, and he used to think that the white line in the road was to drive over. He offered Joyce and I a lift one day, and I've never been so frightened in my life going down Collis Street! He was a nightmare. He'd help with the feeding of the coal into the furnace, and I remember that the one-day there was a tremendous bang – and there was some dynamite in the coal that hadn't been exploded in the mine, and it made a bit of a mess.

There was another old lady that worked there – Nell Coleman – who brought her husband to work with her – he was a bit demented. She was there well into her 80s; she didn't live long after she left. She took snuff too. Lilly Thompson, who had been in the works, went to work in the canteen – she lived in the cottage between the Offices and The Crown. They kept a pig in the back yard. If Lilly was ill then Nell used to run the canteen, but she didn't know what she was doing, and she was so dirty anyway.

Joe Rowberry would come into the offices with a big shovel full of hot ashes to light the fires, and fill the place with smoke behind him.

I also remember the tramp that slept in the kilns – Thompson. He was a recluse, but he was very nicely spoken.

I met my husband through the works – he was a lorry driver for Sid Priest. They had 5 or 6 lorries and used to take the bricks from the works to our customers, and fetch clay from Bonneybridge in Scotland.